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ABSTRACT

Drawing on information from 15 sources, this literature review discusses advantages/disadvantages of small schools and summarizes practices for both rural and urban small schools to follow to maintain educational quality despite dwindling enrollments and resources. Small school disadvantages in the areas of staff, instructional program, and materials are noted. Aspects of instruction, interaction, and parent/community involvement cited as small school strengths include favorable student/teacher ratios, learner-centered environment, innovative methods (individualization, independent study), higher levels of learning, teacher knowledge of individual student needs and strengths, more student/teacher and student/student interaction, family atmosphere, cross-age grouping, good teacher/administrator relationships, participative management, cooperation with other schools to maximize resources, good relationship with the community, community and volunteer involvement, parent approval of small schools, good parent/teacher relationships, and financial support from parents and community. Instructional techniques recommended for small schools are individualized instruction, independent study, experiential learning, and parent participation in learning. Student groupings found especially effective for small schools are nongraded classrooms, cross-age grouping, and peer teaching and tutoring. Suggested cooperative strategies include team teaching, peer observation to improve teaching, cooperative planning, shared resources, and links with other districts to provide instructional materials, inservice, special programs, and curriculum development. (NEC)

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Administrative Report

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Instructional Implications for Small Schools:

A Review of the Literature

by
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SMERC Information Center
San Mateo County Office of Education

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Instructional Implications for Small Elementary Schools:

A Review of the Literature

School Size and Declining Enrollment

Declining enrollment has changed the face of education. The shrinking of schools has forced educators to re-examine their assumptions about school size and its effects on educational quality. It is often said that educational philosophy swings back and forth like a pendulum, and the experts have certainly changed their thinking on school size. In the 1960s small schools, especially high schools, were considered detrimental to educational quality. In the rush to consolidate many small schools were closed, despite an increasing student population.(1) Research has failed to support the "bigger is better" stance. In fact, large schools have been correlated with lower academic achievement and less student participation. While most of the school size research has focused on high schools, there are similar implications for the elementary level.(2)

Most of the literature on small schools concentrates on rural areas where low enrollment has long been a fact of life. Little has yet been written on the small suburban or city school with its unique set of circumstances. As we begin to understand the full implications of the enrollment decline, attention may shift from crises like school closings to dealing with the day-to-day realities of maintaining educational quality despite dwindling enrollments and resources.

Effective School Size

There has been a great deal of research on school size over the past 50 years. While studies have not established an ideal size, few researchers recommend an elementary school population of less than 300.(3) One study stated that 300 students was the "absolute minimum size for an effective academic program."(4) Other studies have recommended minimum elementary enrollments ranging from 175 to 720 students, with optimum size recommendations ranging from 350 to 720.(5) From this wide diversity of expert opinions it is evident that the research is far from conclusive. The Educational Research Service has stated, "School size is not absolute; it is but one of many factors related to educational quality. Good education can and does occur in schools ranging in size from small to large."(6)

There is also evidence that school size plays a very small role in educational effectiveness. James Coleman, in his famous 1966 study on equality of educational opportunity, found that family background was the most important factor in student achievement. School factors were barely significant; the most influential school factor was the nature of the student body.(7)

Instruction and Declining Enrollment

Declining enrollment has affected instruction in several ways. It has brought about an increase in the average age of teachers, coupled with greater use of part time teachers and volunteers in the classroom. In addition, teachers are more frequently shifted from school to school. The decline in resources has led to longer replacement cycles for instructional materials.(8)

A 1979 survey found that 71% of districts with declining enrollment use

alternative educational strategies such as computer assisted instruction, while only 57% of districts whose enrollment is increasing use such methods. The majority of all school districts use individualized instruction and over 60% of all districts use team teaching.

Researchers find that some districts with shrinking enrollments show an improvement in educational quality and some experience a drop in quality. One effect is clear: almost all declining enrollment districts show evidence of some change in the quality of their instructional programs.(9) Some educators view declining enrollment as an opportunity to improve instruction by using new teaching methods, alternative grouping patterns, team teaching and educational technology.(10)

Disadvantages of Small Schools

Small schools present many advantages and disadvantages related to instruction. The disadvantages noted in the literature are far less numerous than the advantages. Among the disadvantages is the lack of choice among teachers and teaching methods in schools with small staffs. A small staff also means there may be fewer diverse approaches and specialties represented.(11) Teachers have fewer colleagues with whom to share ideas.(12) The curriculum may show little variety and there may be limited nonacademic activities.(13) Academics may be emphasized because they are less expensive than other special programs. Small schools may also make less use of expensive educational technology.(14) There may be little variety of books, instructional materials and equipment.(15)

Advantages of Small Schools

The literature cites many advantages of small schools. Frequently mentioned is the favorable student/teacher ratio which can create a

learner-centered atmosphere.(16) One writer used the phrase "empathy for the learner" to describe the strong connection between teacher and student in a small school.(17) Small schools often use innovative and effective instructional methods, such as individualized instruction and independent study.(18) They are more likely to use such methods than are large schools.(19)

Teachers in small schools are more likely to be aware of each student's needs and strengths. There is more interaction both among students and between students and teachers.(20) Small schools can achieve a family atmosphere.(21) Cross age grouping may be used to maximize opportunities for students to learn from each other.(22)

Small schools are well known for their good relationships with parents and the community. Community involvement may include the use of volunteers in the classroom.(23) Parents favor small schools; relationships between parents and teachers are smoother and more productive. Parents and the community are more willing to lend their financial support to small schools.(24) Teachers and administrators may also develop good working relationships, tending toward more participative management.(25) All of these improved relationships can lead to a higher quality of education in small schools.

Small schools find creative ways of maximizing their limited resources. They share with other schools and come up with innovative solutions to resource problems.(26) Researchers have found that small schools show evidence of higher levels of learning.(27) This greater educational effectiveness may be a result of some of the many advantages of small schools.

Improving Instruction

There are steps small schools can take to maintain and improve the standard of instruction. The literature recommends the continued and expanded use of individualized instruction and independent study. Individualization may be crucial if a small school is to maintain a learner-centered environment.(28)

Alternative grouping arrangements such as nongraded classrooms, peer teaching and peer tutoring are also recommended.(29) Experiential learning is especially appropriate. Small schools can take advantage of their natural assets of cooperation, coordination and close student-teacher relationships.(30) The normally high level of parent involvement in small schools presents opportunities to encourage parents to participate in their children's learning.(31)

Team teaching is an alternative way to utilize a small staff. In a small school, teachers can share materials and can cooperate in planning. Peer observation can be an important tool for improving teaching.(32)

There are two words that sum up the essence of improving education in small schools: cooperation and flexibility. Cooperation is necessary within the school to maximize limited resources. It is also important to link with other schools to provide special programs, inservice and instructional materials.(33) Resources may also be shared between small school districts. Curriculum development can become a cooperative venture.(34)

Flexibility is needed to improve both teaching and learning. It takes a flexible faculty and administration to implement such structures as nongraded classes and cross age grouping.(35)

Indicators of Quality

As part of the growing movement for improved school effectiveness, the National Association of Elementary School Principals recently published a report outlining 163 indicators of educational quality for an elementary school. For example, it is recommended that there be no more than 20 students in an elementary school class; fewer than 20, if possible, at the primary level. Students should be grouped according to needs rather than strictly by age and grade. In an effective school, teachers believe that all students are capable of learning. Teachers monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly. The principal should provide strong instructional leadership.(36) Although these indicators are designed to be applied to any elementary school, they reflect some of the unique characteristics of small schools. A small school, by virtue of its size, may be more likely to fulfill some of these measures of quality education.

The report states, "Quality schools are never satisfied that all is well. They are continually seeking to improve."(37) The literature points to the conclusion that when it comes to school size, small is better. The shrinking of schools might be considered a beneficial effect of declining enrollment. There are many tools to help small schools face the challenge of providing a high standard of education for their students. Cooperation and flexibility may be the keys to maximizing educational quality.

NOTES

(1)ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, School Size: A Reassessment of the Small School (1982), ERIC Document ED 213 070, p. 2.

(2)James W. Guthrie, "Organizational Scale and School Success," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, January-February 1979, pp. 22-23.

(3)Fritz Hess et al., Issues in Education: A Documented look at Seven Current Topics (1978), ERIC Document ED 158 391, p. 13.

(4)Hess, p. 6.

(5)Educational Research Service, Summary of Research on the Size of Schools and School Districts (Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service, 1974), pp. 12-14.

(6)Educational Research Service, p. 49.

(7)James Coleman, Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), cited in Anita A. Summers and Barbara L. Wolfe, Which School Resources Help Learning? Efficiency and Equity in Philadelphia Public Schools (1975), ERIC Document ED 102 716, p. 10.

(8)Peter D. Relic, "Don't Let Quality Fall with Enrollments," American School Board Journal, August 1980, p. 30.

(9)Frederick L. Dembowski and Geneva Gay, "Instructional Effects of Declining Enrollments," Educational Leadership, November 1980, p. 173.

(10)Frederick L. Dembowski, The Effects of Declining Enrollments on Instructional Programs and Supervisory Practices in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1979), ERIC Document ED 181 550, p. 21.

(11)Educational Research Service, pp. 8-9.

(12)Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools, Report of the Small Schools Task Force (1973), ERIC Document ED 125 111, p. 4.

(13)Linda O'Neal and Weldon Beckner, A Review of Literature on Rural and/or Small Schools (1980), ERIC Document ED 190 297, pp. 11-13.

(14)Weldon Beckner, The Case for the Smaller School (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983), p. 19.

- (15) Educational Research Service, pp. 8-9.
- (16) O'Neal and Beckner, pp. 9-10.
- (17) A.W. Sturges, "The Small School: A Rediscovered Resource in American Education," North Central Association Quarterly, Fall 1974, p. 292.
- (18) O'Neal and Beckner, pp. 9-10.
- (19) Montgomery County Public Schools, p. 3.
- (20) C. William Day, "Are Small Schools Better?", School Business Affairs, July 1979, pp. 32-33.
- (21) Montgomery County Public Schools, p. 3.
- (22) O'Neal and Beckner, pp. 9-10.
- (23) Montgomery County Public Schools, p. 3.
- (24) Beckner, pp. 13-14.
- (25) Montgomery County Public Schools, p. 3.
- (26) Sturges, p. 293.
- (27) Coleman, cited in Summers, p. 12.
- (28) Beckner, p. 16.
- (29) Beckner, p. 10.
- (30) Beckner, pp. 31-32.
- (31) Beckner, p. 10.
- (32) Beckner, p. 35.
- (33) Beckner, p. 34.
- (34) Anne C. Lewis, Creative Ideas for Small Schools (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, 1981), ERIC Document jED 197 903, p. 39.
- (35) Beckner, p. 36.
- (36) "These Quality Indicators are Elementary," American School Board Journal, February 1985, p. 12.
- (37) "These Quality Indicators are Elementary," American School Board Journal, February 1985, p. 12.

Disadvantages of Small Schools

Staff:

- Limited choice of teachers
- Limited choice of teaching methods
- Few diverse approaches
- Few staff specialties
- Fewer colleagues to share ideas

Instructional Program:

- Little variety in curriculum
- Few nonacademic activities

Materials:

- Lack of educational technology
- Limited choice of books and other instructional materials
- Limited choice of equipment

Advantages of Small Schools

Instruction:

- Favorable student/teacher ratio
- Learner-centered environment
- Innovative methods (individualization, independent study)
- Higher levels of learning

Interaction:

- Teachers know individual students' needs and strengths
- More interaction: student-teacher and student-student
- Family atmosphere
- Cross age grouping
- Good teacher-administrator relationships
- Participative management
- Cooperation with other schools to maximize resources

Parents and Community:

- Good relationship with community
- Community involvement; volunteers
- Parents favor small schools
- Good parent-teacher relationships
- Financial support from parents and community

(continued)

Recommendations for Small Schools

Instruction:

- Individualized instruction
- Independent study
- Experiential learning
- Parent participation in learning

Grouping:

- Nongraded classrooms
- Cross age grouping
- Peer teaching
- Peer tutoring

Cooperation:

- Team teaching
- Peer observation to improve teaching
- Cooperative planning
- Shared resources
- Links with other districts to provide:
 - instructional materials
 - inservice
 - special programs
 - curriculum development

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